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The Japanese Question in California

By

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California has the usual problems of the foreign-born, but it has one of them in acute form. As forty years ago, the Chinese were the objects of violent attack and the surest road to petty political success was by way of the "pogrom" directed against them, so it is today with the Japanese. The general task of Americanization in which they are included along with twenty other races, takes on an entirely different aspect in their case. The way it happens would seem to be this:

Underneath, there is that curious instinctive distrust of people whom we do not understand; or do not try to understand. Such distrust does not break out when things run smoothly, when there is nothing in which the other race interferes with our particular purposes. But it is always there, a survival of tribal days. It is the source of the various contemptuous names which we so readily apply to other races. It is the opportunity of unscrupulous politicians and of self-seeking leaders whether they be editors of newspapers or representatives of labor or of commerce.

The sudden rise of Japan to be a world power lies against that background of racial distrust. Even since the Russo-Japanese war, men have looked across the Pacific and seen the yellow peril looming bigger and bigger. The militarists in America (that is, the men who live by fear and not by faith) have concluded that a conflict is inevitable, thus responding in kind to the militarists in Japan. The yellow press has featured the yellow peril until distrust has slowly become active dread.

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In such circumstances, the California situation could readily be foreseen. Trouble arose in 1906-7 concerning the Japanese in the public schools. It was a small local question, but it strained international relations and led to the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement by which

Japan undertook to prevent the emigration to America of her laboring class. But race feeling continued to be stirred. In 1913 the Alien Land Law was passed to prevent the Japanese ownership of land. In 1919, a new anti-Japanese campaign began. It has been conducted with extreme virulence and sometimes with extreme overstatement. It proposes a series of measures far more radical than any yet before the people. In the state, it is fathering an initiative measure which would absolutely prohibit ownership or leasing by Japanese, the acquiring of any share in any company holding land, and the acquiring of land by any American-born minor (an American citizen, of course) under the guardianship of a parent. Other features of the law would seem to make it easy to confiscate property already owned by Japanese.

This state program is part of a larger one which would cancel the Gentlemen's Agreement in favor of an absolute exclusion law, bar Asiatics forever from American citizenship, and amend the Constitution so that no child of Asiatic descent could ever become an American citizen.

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Now in dealing with this situation, the difficulty is not made easier by the fact that the main purpose of the agitation is right and desirable. What is wrong is the method, for hatred and distrust and intolerance are always wrong. What is vicious is that the leaders are frightening public sentiment into extreme measures, which can only increase bad feeling, to gain an end which can be attained by moderate, just and peaceful means.

The main purpose is to protect American life and standards which would appear to be threatened by any large body of Japanese, with their so different type of civilization.

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It is better for America not to have its problem of Americanization increased tenfold. We have enough to do to unify our present heterogeneous population. By inviting Oriental im-

migration, we simply increase our difficulties and we do more, we imperil the peace of the world. We do that, because in the present state of public sentiment, so long as there is danger of the growth of the Japanese population, we are always on the verge of racial outbreaks. It is not a question of what ought to be. It is a question of what is. The Japanese are peaceable, industrious, law-abiding, in the communities where they settle. Many of their near neighbors have only good words for them. But the fact remains that their presence, and indeed their very prosperity, make them a prolific source of conflict. So long as public sentiment is not satisfied that the menace of immigration of large numbers has been abated, so long we are in danger of international complications. For the peace of the world, as well as for the good of our own communities, I believe that immigration from Asia should cease. There is here no question of equality or inequality of races. There is here no denial of the Christian faith that the peoples of the earth are all of God's great family and brothers. But even the most affectionate brothers among us normally find it wiser to bring up their families under different roofs. It is better for both Japan and America that there should not be an attempt to put too many of their children under the same roof, at least until they know each other a good deal better than they do now.

It was that conviction which led to the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907. California was right in what it then desired. California is wrong if she becomes responsible for the impression that Japan has not kept that agreement. According to the agreement, Japan would not give passports to agricultural laborers not already possessed of an interest in a farming enterprise in this country. There is no evidence that this agreement has been violated. The net increase of Japanese population by immigration in the eleven years since the agreement went into effect is just about 11,000, chiefly consisting of former residents, and of wives and children. There has been a

little smuggling across the borders but no evidence to show any government complicity in such. There was some ground for thinking that the spirit of the agreement was broken by the introduction of "picture brides." But there would seem to be less than 4,000 such brides admitted during the eleven years.

It is clear at a glance that such immigration has not reached proportions which are really alarming. Furthermore, on the advice of the Japanese in America, the Tokio government will no longer issue passports to picture brides. If then, as would seem likely from the newspaper reports, the governments of the two countries are negotiating towards an extension of the Gentlemen's Agreement there is literally no excuse for any attempt to push discriminatory immigration legislation through Congress. It would be an insult to a proud nation. It would give the militarists in Japan a new hold. It would satisfy some local prejudice at the sacrifice of friendly relations with our nearest trans-Pacific neighbor. A general immigration law, such as that proposed by the Constructive Immigration League, which would limit immigration in any one year from any one nation to a small percentage of the number of those born in that nation already in America, would reduce Japanese immigration to an almost negligible number. The Gentlemen's Agreement can do the rest. Japan is as much interested as America in such an agreement, for the suffering which a war would bring must fall more severely on Japan than on America. It is no race prejudice, but the peace of the world and the interests of Christian civilization which require that Oriental immigration be halted at least until a few more generations of friendly intercourse have brought us to know one another better and have thrown light on the problem of assimilation.

But what of the Japanese in California already? How are we to treat them? What is our responsibility towards them? We may begin by saying that we have treated them very badly. Our criticism has been most un-

fair. We condemn them if they buy land and settle. We denounce them if they send their money back to Japan, instead. We curse them for bringing their families and trying to get a "stake in the land." We curse them because they (or some of them) do the other thing. We say that they can not be assimilated to our political and civic and industrial life; and we never lift a hand to make the attempt. The attempt at least can and ought to be made. We must remember that the present Japanese population of California or of the United States can not in itself be a menace. We would be confessing ourselves weaklings and fools to think that American institutions are in peril because there are between 75,000 and 100,000 Japanese in California (the lowest estimates are about 72,000; the extreme agitators put it only at 100,000) and one or two score thousands more in the rest of the country. California has 3,600,000 inhabitants, according to the 1920 census. That is only one Japanese to thirty-five Americans even if there were 100,000 of the former. It might seem as if the 35 could manage the one without recourse to either violence or injustice. What we need in California is to stop growing panicky and take up our problem like sensible and Christian men.

The proposed initiative measure is beautifully adapted to defeat any just and therefore permanent solution. To deprive the Japanese already here of any chance to establish themselves on the land, own their homes and begin to develop a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the country can have only one of two results. Either they will go back to Japan smarting under the injustice to them and the ruin of their hopes, or they will stay here as irresponsible wage laborers, treated as inferiors, smarting under the injustice, "sores in the body politic," a prolific source of racial trouble. Either result can only heighten the indignation of the Japanese people and increase the international tension. The proposals are unjust. Whether or not they are constitutional and

within the treaty rights, they certainly violate the spirit of the existing treaty and they deprive those who have come here of the opportunities for which they came. Like most legislation which grows out of fear, they gain a small immediate end by sacrificing the larger and vastly more important values. They gain a momentary advantage over the small number of Japanese here, and risk the friendship of two great nations.

What we need is first the relief (already in sight) from any further immigration and then a real program of Americanization. That means primarily a straightforward effort to Christianize the whole attitude of the American public toward the problem. There must be coolness, self-control, and charity in all our thinking. Hatred and fear and prejudice get us nowhere. They are un-American as well as un-Christian. Coming at the problem in the right spirit, the fundamental principles of action are clear. They are two: the supreme importance of international goodwill and the equally supreme demand for justice. International goodwill must not be sacrificed. The future of the world is largely dependent upon the way in which the relations of the white and yellow races are worked out. Peace and friendship, the spirit of international coöperation which is foreshadowed in the preamble to the League of Nations Covenant, and the recognition of common humanity are essential to any new international world order. They must be won if the frightful catastrophe of another world war in which Asia will be lined up against Europe and America is to be averted. Such a war would be the "twilight" of civilization. All our small immediate concerns are wrapped up with this great issue.

And again, injustice can not well bear fruit of justice. We can not hope that other nations will follow any lead of ours unless our own hands are clean. We boast of our American conscience. Let us get it to work.

With such principles, we may then discover that the heart of the matter is the realization

that the task of dealing with our Japanese neighbors is a common task. It is not ours or theirs, but belongs to both of us together. We must surrender the notion that Washington is to dictate and Tokio to accept; or that Washington is to decide and Tokio to—"like it or lump it." The Gentlemen's Agreement in its very name expresses the kind of way in which the whole matter must be approached. It is the Christian's way as well as the gentleman's way.

That for the governments. It is equally true in the problem of the Japanese living among us. Americanization means not moulding them to our liking, but accepting them as co-laborers in the task of bring unity out of difference. It means giving them the opportunity to learn the best in our civilization, to come in contact with our ideals, to have a share in our civic life, and so far as they are citizens, in our political life. It is our own fault if a Japanese, born an American citizen, grows up loving Japan more than America and wedded to the ideals of Asiatic civilization. To give the Japanese among us a real chance does not mean inter-marriage, or raise any questions of that kind of assimilation. It means throwing open to them our churches, our shops, our art, our music. It means treating them as friends and not as enemies; as equals and not as inferiors.

But it must be done with them and not for them. The very basis of democracy, as of Christianity, is trust in man. We must begin by trusting that if we put before them a worthy end they will join us in seeking it.

To sum up: a true American policy is the same as a true Christian policy. It means an agreement with Japan in the interests of world peace to stop further immigration; and it means an honest effort to Americanize the Japanese already here. Until such efforts have failed, we have no right to appeal to what is essentially force.